Black "Crime," Public Hysteria, and the Cinema of Containment: Black Cinema Aesthetics from *Willie Dynamite* to *The Interrupters* and *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert*

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Abstract: This essay will explore the ways in which African American visual culture has attempted to negotiate criminalization and the current situation of what Richard Iton rightfully characterizes as "hyperincarceration." It will explore the ways in which contemporary African American visual culture is engaged in negotiating between the literal material realities and consequences of mass incarceration and aesthetic constructions of violence. While mass incarceration is increasingly becoming understood as "the New Jim Crow" for African American political organizing, Black criminality has become the key lens through which questions of masculinity, class exclusion, gender, and selfhood get negotiated in African American visual culture. This essay will argue that the "subtext of ongoing Black captivity" is the pretext for much of what drives Black action genres and African American representation in general as a key signifier of a racialized identity and as an indicator of a Black subjectivity fraught with complexities of non-belonging.

Keywords: African American Cinema, Mass Incarceration, Black Subjectivity, Masculinity, Action Cinema, Black Aesthetics

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"Here's a little something about a nigga like me
never should have been let out the penitentiary"
—Ice Cube (O' Shea Jackson), "Gangsta Gangsta"

It is a familiar dilemma. How do the excluded engage the apparently dominant order? Does progress entail that the marginalized accept mainstream norms and abandon transformative possibilities? These questions, of course, become more complicated once we recognize that the excluded are never simply excluded and that their marginalization reflects and determines the

> shape, textures, and boundaries of the dominant order and its associated privileged communities. The identities of the latter are inevitably defined in opposition to, and as a negation of, the representations of the marginalized, and in certain respects, the outside is always inside; invisible perhaps, implicated and disempowered, unrecognized but ominpresent. In this context, how do the outcast imagine and calibrate progress, and assess options?
>
> —Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*

> I've been in the game for years.
> It made me an animal.
> There's rules to this shit.
> So I wrote me a manual.
> A step by step booklet for you to get your game on track.
>
> —Biggie Smalls / Notorious B.I.G., "The Ten Crack Commandments"

The success of John Singleton's landmark 1991 film *Boyz in the Hood* and Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City*, released the same year, triggered a barrage of "hood films" thematizing a perceived wave of African American criminality that was thought to signal a larger breakdown in African American family and community life. From *New Jersey Drive* (Nick Gomez, 1995), *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes, 1993), *Juice* (Ernest R. Dickerson, 1993), *South Central* (Stephen Milburn Anderson, 1992), *Dead Presidents* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 1995), *In Too Deep* (Michael Rymer, 1999) and, *Belly* (Hype Williams, 1998) to smaller, independent films such *Straight Outta Brooklyn* (Mattie Rich, 1991) and *Just Another Girl on the ITR* (Leslie Harris, 1992), the films explored crime as endemic to African American cultural expression and experience.

This essay will explore the ways in which African American visual culture has attempted to negotiate criminalization and the current situation of what Richard Iton rightfully characterizes as "hyperincarceration" (138). It will explore the ways in which contemporary African American visual culture is engaged in negotiating between the literal material realities and consequences of mass incarceration and aesthetic constructions of violence that necessitate African American's continuing representational status at the visual nexus of violent action and mechanisms of state control. While mass incarceration is increasingly becoming understood as "the New Jim Crow" for African American political organizing, Black criminality has become the key lens through which questions of masculinity, class exclusion, gender, and self-hood get negotiated in African American visual culture.[1] From the murder of Trayvon Martin to Tyler Perry's 2009 comedy *Madea Goes to Jail*, the public perception that criminality and African American cultural identity are inextricably bound together continues to be both a shaping and contested arena for visual culture.

In *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, Gladstone Yearwood explores the attempt to define a cinematic language in relationship to the multifaceted nature of Black independent film created in the late 1970s including Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama*, Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Larry Clark's *Passing Through*, and Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baaadassss Song*![2] Because the development of post-1965 independent African American film directly coincided with the development of Black mass incarceration, all of the films Yearwood mentions in relationship to the new Black independent

cinema, with the exception of *Killer of Sheep*, prominently thematize policing and the ever-present threat and reality of incarceration as narrative devices and as visual metaphors for Black captivity. African American independent film, in its incarnations from narrative cinema to documentary, would confront incarceration directly and indirectly, visually and narratively as an attempt to counter public hysteria on Black crime.

The specter of Black mass incarceration would not be absent from Hollywood cinema either. In "The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing," Jared Sexton has explored "a subtext of *ongoing* Black captivity" present in Hollywood cinema that narratively rotates around Black men and policing as much of Hollywood cinema does (60). This essay will argue that the "subtext of ongoing Black captivity" is the pretext for much of what drives Black action genres and African American representation in general as a key signifier of a racialized identity and as an indicator of a Black subjectivity fraught with complexities of non-belonging. Though African Americans are obviously constituted historically through their formative status as captives under slavery, hyperincarceration calls the notion of this status as historical past into question. What has resulted is a representational culture in which African Americans are almost always presented in relationship to the question of captivity, either as a "subtext" driving popular narrative film, as Sexton has argued, or as calibrated in a kind of "game" with knowable rules and consistent outcomes, in which the deck is always necessarily stacked against the players' basic humanity, as the Notorious B.I.G. asserts in "The Ten Crack Commandments."[3] Traditional aesthetic questions around Black representation have been completely reoriented around the realities of Black mass incarceration. In exploring three distinct representational moments of Black filmmaking involving African Americans and criminality, the essay examines the way in which incarceration has become a predominate mode of scripting and understanding African American subjectivity.

The "hood films" of the nineties stood in an often-unacknowledged cultural dialogue with Blaxploitation film, the first post-civil rights era film wave of Black-cast popular filmmaking. Both film waves came during public moral panics around urbanity, crime, and African American inclusion in larger U.S. culture and society. While the Blaxploitation film boom followed the spectacular success of the civil rights movement and seemed to run counter to that movement's deep investment in the politics of respectability, the "hood films" followed on the heels of the success of the coalition politics of Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH and Rainbow Coalition, seeming to embrace a dystopian visual rhetoric that dismissed hope as a plausible organizing principle. These two film waves seemed to suggest and insist, both progressively and retrogressively, on the complex nature of inclusion and exclusion in American society.

Criminality has increasingly, since the seventies, becomes the major lens through which Black subjectivity is understood. As the prison population grew exponentially and became darker, criminality and incarceration became the most common matrix through which cinematic notions of "the real" and Black authenticity have been constructed. The primary framework through which popular culture engages with the question of mass incarceration is visual violence. In her groundbreaking treatise on prison abolition, Angela Davis has noted the intrinsic linkages between images of prison and "common sense" about the very necessity of prison itself. She writes:

> It is virtually impossible to avoid consuming images of prison.… The prison is one of the

> most important features of our image environment. This has caused us to take the existence of prisons for granted. The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us. We do not question whether it should exist. It has become so much a part of our lives that it requires a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond the prison. (19)

Davis's work is suggestive of the symbiotic relationship between images of prison in the popular imaginary and the reality of prison as it is made manifest in public culture. The ubiquitous presence and apparent popularity of prison images in popular culture speaks to a complex negotiation between it and Jared Sexton's notion of "a subtext of *ongoing* black captivity" (60). With nearly 60% of the U.S. prison population being African American, it is clear that prisons could not exist without the African Americans that fill them. But can African Americans exist without prisons that consistently construct them as subjects in visual culture?

With their roots in the independent and experimental film and video movements, *The Interrupters* (Steve James, 2011) and *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* (Coco Fusco, 2004) come out of and are guided by very different historical moments and cinematic impulses than *Willie Dynamite* (Gilbert Moses, 1974) coming as it did in the early post-civil rights era. *The Interrupters* and *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* are both interpreters and inheritors of the civil rights era legacy in which, not only has "the prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense" but "the prison is one of the most important features of our image environment" as Angela Davis writes (19). They implicitly attempt to provide a counter-discourse of incarceration to contemporaneous popular narrative film such as *American Gangster* (Ridley Scott, 2007) and *Training Day* (Antoine Fuqua, 2001).

The film *Willie Dynamite* epitomized the ambiguities in the Blaxploitation's depiction of Black crime that resulted from public policy debates on Black pathology and a perceived gender crisis in the African American community. Guided by a strong presumption of African American criminality, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, characterized African Americans as "entrapped" in a "tangle of pathology" created by a perversion of gender roles (29-30). The highly influential 1965 report, which was authored by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and would become known as "The Moynihan Report," is one of the major documents shaping not only public policy but public perceptions. It states: "A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often-reversed roles of husband and wife" (28). The report concludes that the "reversed roles" that characterize gender in the African American community has had catastrophic consequences.

> In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is too out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. (29)

The crushing burden of gender that the report enumerates as endemic to the African American community is responsible for everything from African American men's inability to pass the Armed Forces testing to an increasing alienation of youth. The report concludes: "In a word, the tangle of pathology is tightening" (30).

The Moynihan Report is squarely located at the beginning of the trend in which the increase

in Black mass incarceration is justified by the presumption of the inherent criminality of African Americans themselves. Though it is centered around the supposed breakdown of the African American family, the Moynihan Report devoted an entire section to the question of crime. It concludes: "It is probable that at present, a majority of the crimes against the person, such as rape, murder, and aggravated assault are committed by Negroes. There is, of course, no absolute evidence; inference can only be made from arrest and prison population statistics" (38).

Public policy guided by the presumption of Black pathology and criminality was countered by Black Power's assertions of cultural autonomy as well as growing concern about the social implications of mass incarceration coupled with a re-scripting of prisons as a tool of genocidal oppression. Many Black Power groups saw the reconstruction of Black masculinity as a central project in the assertion of cultural autonomy and the building of a viable political foundation. Black Panther Party Chairman Huey P. Newton argued:

> Until recently black people who haven't been enlightened have defined the white man by calling him "the MAN." "The Man" is making this decision, "The Man" this and "The Man" that. The black woman found it difficult to respect the black man because he didn't even define himself as a man!" (61)

Willie Dynamite collapses ideas of Black pathology and criminality with anxieties about Black sexuality and gender roles shortly after the moment of their inception as public policy in the Moynihan Report.

Willie Dynamite was produced by Richard Zanuck and David Brown the same year that they would produce *The Sting* (George Roy Hill, 1973), a highly stylized crime drama starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman. *Willie Dynamite*'s brutish and violent hypermasculinity stands in stark contrast to the cerebrally driven con games of *The Sting*. The "familiar dilemma" that Richard Iton speaks of in the epigraph would caution us to see a history of Black representation as a continuum of negotiations rather than as cumulating oppositions. In *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Stuart Hall et al.'s pioneering work on "moral panics," crime is as much an invention in discourse as it is a chartable social phenomenon. For *Policing the Crisis*, the threat of Black crime is isolated as a major factor in negotiating public policy on everything from public space usage to minority and youth culture. First published in 1978, the authors of *Policing the Crisis* examined the way in which a U.S. discourse of "law and order" gets imported to the U.K. as a response to social anxiety around the increasing presence of non-white youth in British society. British media and state control agencies such as the police and social services negotiate social anxiety around race and youth culture by defining a now familiar but then relatively new correlation between non-white youth and crime.

The authors' notion of a "moral panic" is rooted in an ideological unpacking of the presumed neutrality of statistical fact. They write: "Statistics—whether crime rates or opinion polls—have an ideological function: they appear to *ground* free floating and controversial impressions in the hard, incontrovertible soil of numbers" (Hall et al. 9). The moral panic is a kind of "ideological displacement" created within the realm of representation:

> We conclude from this examination that the reaction to "mugging" was all out of proportion to any level of actual threat, which could be reconstructed through the unreliable statistics. And since it appeared to be a response, at least in part, not to the actual threat, it must have been a reaction by the control agencies and the media to the *perceived* or *symbolic* threat to society—what the "mugging" label *represented*. But this made the social reaction to mugging now as problematic—if not more so—than the "mugging" itself. When such discrepancies appear between threat and reaction, between what is perceived and what that is a perception of, we do have good evidence to suggest we are in the presence of an ideological displacement. We call this displacement a *moral panic*. (Hall et al. 29)

Though the correlation between non-white youth and crime has effects in the "real" material world in terms of courts and incarceration, it is one that is importantly created through representation. And though *Policing the Crisis* identifies a now familiar pattern between media representation and rising incarceration rates, the study could not have imagined the astounding rates of mass incarceration in the period that followed the seventies in the United States. They could also have not imagined the intensely racialized nature of mass incarceration, which finds the majority of the U.S. prison population composed of racial minorities, or the disproportionate way in which mass incarceration has become a shaping factor in African American life, guiding everything from public policy to "common sense" expectations of freedom, wealth accumulation, and life expectancy. Moral panics around African Americans and criminality have created crime and punishment as predominant factors in the shape of Black life and have consequently shaped the ways that African Americans have been represented and have responded to representation. If the "terrible spectacle" of slavery and its attendant violence were generative for the self-making of the enslaved, providing "an inaugural moment in [their] formation" as Saidiya Hartman has claimed, then incarceration represents a continuing meditation on the visual spectacle of violence and freedom that continues to ask Hartman's key question: "How does one tell the story of an elusive emancipation and a travestied freedom?" (10).

Cathy Cohen has characterized the post-Reagan era African American community as caught in "a period of contradictions and advanced marginalization" (85). Cohen notes that while African American participation in electoral politics has grown exponentially since the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, African Americans are increasingly marginalized in a manner that has happened economically as well as socially. One of the major factors shaping social marginalization is "hyperincarceration." Iton observes the connection between constructions of Black agency and the historical correlation between the civil rights movement and Black mass incarceration:

> Overall, it does not require much more imagination to suggest that the civil rights movement and the prison construction movement are causally related—given the broader historical tendency to see Black agency as outside the political, as unnatural, improper, or simply criminal—or to identify the discursive retractions that have enable and mirrored these new social geographies. (136)

Iton suggests that, for African Americans, mass incarceration creates a new relationship to questions of national belonging asking us to consider the ways in which it "functions as a form of deportation" (136).

Iton asks us to consider:

> the ways the hyperincarceration of black individuals—and the associated that typically follow release (beyond the restrictions associated with parole and probation)—in terms of voting rights access to public housing and public benefits in general, stigmatization, and effective disqualification from participation in the mainstream economy—represents a form of denaturalization: the removal of citizenship status from those involved and to some extent their families as well. (136)

Coming as it did ten years after the passage of the civil rights act, and at the tail end of Richard Nixon's "law and order" presidency, *Willie Dynamite* coalesces anxieties about the Black body, Black citizenship, gender, criminality, and various moral panics in relationship to the presence of African Americans and the assumed breakdown of U.S. social, cultural, and sexual mores and values.

In the film, Willie Dynamite is a successful pimp who dreams of even greater success in recreating his individual success along a model of organized crime. "It's no different than any other industry," Martha Reeves, formerly of the influential Motown girl group Martha and the Vandellas, sings of Willie Dynamite's prostitution ring during the opening credits as the women in his employ parade by. The character Willie Dynamite claims about himself early in the film: "This is a business, baby, a production line.… Willie's selling an idea!" Though the film would seem to visually replicate the traditional terms of prostitution by putting women on display, it is really Willie Dynamite's beautiful Black masculinity that is for sale.

The power of that masculinity is a highly contingent one as *Willie Dynamite* is predicated on a Moynihanesque engagement with gender. Since "dependence on the mother's income undermines the position of the father and deprives the children of any attention" according to the Moynihan report, it is the economic power of African American women that is catastrophically overturning the proper gender order and subsequently undermining African American masculinity and consequently destroying the African American family (28). *Willie Dynamite* is typical and atypical of Blaxploitation in that it foregrounds Black masculinity in crisis but it also foregrounds a need to dominate and control women as fundamental to an expression of Black masculinity. In a sort of actualization of the Moynihan Report's imperative that African American men restore economic power through the restoration of the proper gender order, Willie Dynamite, in his role as a pimp, wields his masculinity as a tool of economic as well as social power. Typically for the blaxploitation genre, the film rotates around the fierce display of Black hypermasculinity but it is atypical in making that masculinity as dangerous to women as it is seductive. When an African American social worker refuses to comply with Willie Dynamite's request that he leave "his girls" alone, he threatens to rape her but he ultimately triumphs by dating her. According to Moynihan, the female social worker plays a major role in the emasculation of African American men because she colludes with the female head of household to strip the unemployed male of any power he may have (19).

The title character, as played by Roscoe Orman, is an extreme combination of potent sexuality and conscious consumer capitalism. After being arrested on trumped up charges and told the arrest results from the fact that he resembled the suspect in a robbery who is "a Black man in a brown coat," Willie Dynamite responds with outrage grabbing his iconic and exaggerated "pimp" coat and

shouting indignantly: "This coat is lamb. I paid a thousand dollars for it." He continues to shout as he is booked: "It's lamb! *Lamb*!" According to the Moynihan report the possibility of "the emergence of a strong father," the key to African American economic stability, is crippled by a historical legacy of emasculation that is actualized by an inability to publicly perform masculinity. "The very essence of the male animal, from bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. Indeed, in 19th century America, a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became a national style. Not for the Negro. The 'sassy nigger' was lynched" (16). Through the aggressive display of a masculinity that is as beautiful as it is dangerous, Willie Dynamite violently and completely unironically uses his masculine power to restore a patriarchal social order that has been wrenched out of order by the economic power of African American women.

The original prototype for the Blaxploitation hero is found in *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song*! in which the hero is a performer in brothel sex shows whose most potent weapon is his penis. As Yvonne Tasker has argued in her groundbreaking study of the action genre, for action film, "the spectacle of action is the narrative" (Hartman 6). For Blaxploitation, both spectacle and action are profoundly racialized and highly sexualized. Despite his rhetoric of Black self-empowerment, Willie Dynamite, who's "got a woman for every man" as the title track tells us, runs a prostitution ring that works primarily in the service of white businessmen. Darius James labels the film "a sly satire told in the toast mode on the impulses that drive corporate America" and credits Willie Dynamite's "outrageous sense of fashion" for creating the "all-out best Blaxploitation movie of the seventies" (81). However, it must be remembered that the spectacle of the character's sartorial sense as well as business sense that constitutes the narrative and visual pleasure of the film works in the service of white patriarchy. Throughout the film, a visual and thematic equivalency is drawn between African American women and money. The action and the visual pleasure of the film comes from Willie Dynamite's ability to harness and control the economic power of African American women thus righting as the Moynihan report advised a gender order that has gone dangerously awry.

Stephen Prince reminds us that "the cinema cannot present violence in other than a pleasure-inducing capacity. … The medium inevitably *aestheticizes* violence" (27). Cinematic violence becomes seductive through its cinematic aestheticization and it is that aestheticization that creates pleasure for the viewer. Prince continues: "In significant ways, the aesthetic contract that the filmmaker must honor with viewers entails that screen violence be made to offer sensory pleasure" (29). The violent pleasure of Blaxploitation film is bound up in the pleasurable play of looking at race, violence, and racialized sexuality as action and spectacle. Willie Dynamite is not only a pimp but the film also thematizes sexual violence narratively as the motivator for its action in relationship to the film's main plot, the violent competition between rival pimps, and in subplots in which rape and then the threat of a rape charge is invoked by a social worker who hopes to reform him. Willie Dynamite's movement as an action star animates the spectacle of fashion and sexuality that is simultaneously part of the display of Blaxploitation masculinity. Powerful, pleasurable, and outlaw, Willie Dynamite offers the visual pleasures of Black masculinity at the expense of Black women.

Michelle Alexander famously notes that there are currently more African American men in prison, on parole or probation then there were in slavery before the Civil War began in 1850. If film images of incarceration were guided by public policy and radical culture that invested in the project of reconstructing Black masculinity, then post-1960s African American image culture was primarily

motivated by the need to explain Black mass incarceration as the post-civil rights project of Black mass inclusion met the post-civil rights nightmare of Black mass incarceration in the seventies. The primary way that post-1960s Hollywood film would negotiate this is by bifurcating the image of African American men in relationship to either law enforcement or law breaking.

St. Clair Bourne notes the ways that mainstream cinema appropriated the potentially revolutionary formulas of films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baaadasss Song*! with an erasure of Black sexuality and by creating a positive tie between African American men and policing. Bourne notes: "Sweetback was the revolutionary aspect but Hollywood took that character, de-sexed him and made him an extension of the establishment by making him have the badge" (55). The financial success of Blaxploitation created in B studios awakened mainstream Hollywood to the fiscal possibilities that African American audiences represented as well as the lucrative possibilities in coopting African American cultures for mainstream audiences. When coupled with the changing cultural mores of the early post-civil rights moment, this financial imperative helped to usher in an era of unprecedented African American presence in mainstream visual culture. The Hollywood formulas that simply coopted the revolutionary aspects of Blaxploitation by tethering it to the vehicle of African American law enforcement officers increased dramatically throughout the 1980s and 1990s as the illusion of inclusion became increasingly frayed.

Jared Sexton shows that Denzel Washington, the leading African American actor of our time and successor to groundbreaking Black Hollywood actor Sidney Poitier, has made his fame by defining himself in relationship to law enforcement, as did Poitier in the groundbreaking 1967 film *In the Heat of the Night*. Sexton writes of Washington:

> As of this writing, Washington has been cast as an officer of the law thirteen times and, in related fashion, appeared as a current or former military officer another seven. To date, he has appeared in uniform in more than half of the nearly forty films he has completed since his 1981 debut in Michael Schultz's *Carbon Copy*. As noted, nearly every noteworthy black male actor of the post–civil rights era has made this professional rite of passage as officer, detective, sergeant, lieutenant, or chief. All have played roles as either a cop or a soldier and the lion's share have earned their reputations and their largest paydays in such roles, perhaps none more so than Washington. (42)

If the African American male hero is made "an extension of the establishment by making him have the badge" then those heroes are both forever haunted and threatened by the specter of the criminal, "the bad nigger." In asking "if it is the specter of 'the nigger' that provides the conveniences and makes the rationalities on which governmentalities depend, how do American blacks constitute and represent themselves?" (140), Richard Iton defines "the nigger" as "the convenient and necessary other of the citizen: the exploitable, expendable, and disposable (and blackened) body" (135).

Blaxploitation actualizes the bifurcation of Black masculinity into law breakers and law enforcers through narrative. In *Willie Dynamite*, for example, the character of Willie Dynamite is relentlessly pursued by an African American police officer. The negotiations of the masculine body that Blaxploitation engaged in are ongoing even in the Trayvon Martin case in which the ever-present threat of the Black male body as lawbreaker was made manifest in a baby-faced teenager. The body of

the dead teenager was made to disappear under a discourse of "the hoodie," which became a symbolic shorthand for Black male criminality. The iconography of "the hoodie" stood as both a replacement and containment of the threat of the black body as well as an enactment of its erasure as a site of violation.

While popular television series such as *Weeds* and *Breaking Bad* seek to humanize and suburbanize the violence of the drug trade in relationship to mainstream America, African Americans increasingly move towards a cinema of containment in which the aesthetic and narrative practices of representation rotate around African Americans' status as captives. This aesthetic of containment is present not only in narrative film but in practically every genre in which African American representation is present, from Hollywood film to independent arthouse cinema. The development of a cinematic language and a Black cinema aesthetic has become increasingly dependent on a thematic and aesthetic of captivity.

If African American women are found guilty in the Moynihan report and in *Willie Dynamite* rather than being consigned to prison they are consigned to the carceral space of the ghetto, which is characterized by spatial entrapment that mimics the visual and social dynamics of Black mass incarceration. Mark Frederick Baker and Houston A. Baker, Jr. speculate that the spatial realities of predominantly African American neighborhoods have been so deeply reconfigured around policing and surveillance that "the black community might signify a community of prisoners" (217). Even when African Americans are not literally captive on screen, they are made captive by the violence that defines their raciality.

Lee Daniels is one of the most successful African American filmmakers of all time blending an independent sensibility in films such as *Precious* (2009) with an ability to operate successfully in Hollywood with films such as *Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001) and *The Butler* (2013). Although his most successful films have significantly centered on the experiences of African American women narratively, they are also profoundly locked within the representational realm of the carceral. Despite Ishmael Reed labeling *Precious* as "the worst film ever made about black life," it is one of the most critically celebrated and financially successful African American films of contemporary times (n. p.). Daniels's previous status as the first African American producer of an Academy Award winning film— *Monster's Ball*—set the stage for his success with *Precious*. But, according to the mythology of the film, Daniels struggled to get the film made and distributed at all. The mythology of the film, its difficulties in getting made, the filmmaker's supposed status as a Hollywood outsider, and the narrative world of the film itself co-exist with a filmic world where characters are defined by the criminality and violence that also traps and contains them.

The text, subtext, and the context of Daniels's films and their production histories epitomize the ways in which the carceral is at the center of African American visual culture. *Monster's Ball* revolves around the romance between an African American woman, played by Halle Berry who got an Oscar for her performance, and a white prison guard who works at the prison where her husband awaits execution. The carceral context of the film is obvious and it was partly filmed on location at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in West Feliciana Parish but the context and subtext is also steeped in the carceral. Though *Precious* was one of the top-grossing and most critically acclaimed films of the year and Daniels had previously been connected to several high-profile projects including *Monster's Ball* and has no criminal record, he characterizes his fundraising for the film in the language of crime

and violence. Daniels says of producing: "It's no different than a drug deal. People have trouble getting movies made, but how many people could go out and steal for their families? You go in, you go gangster, you get what you've got to get and go on to the next. It's just another hustle" (Hirschberg n. p.).

The film, despite its Hollywood cast and relatively high budget, is also continuously cast as an independent expression of African American life. Noting that it "is shot in an almost-documentary style," the *New York Times* lauded the film as an "independent film" and quotes one film executive as saying: "All the barriers were in Lee's way," which is mostly based on a construction of Daniels's status as a Hollywood outsider because of his race. This status as a racial outsider is repeatedly reinforced by the article, including actress Helen Mirren's characterization of Daniels as a "mad-looking man with wild dreadlocks" and "a complete madman" whom she first met when he accosted her on a public street. Daniels describes himself as "ghetto" and speaks frequently about his upbringing in terms of the world portrayed in the film, though the facts of his life, including being raised by a father who was a police officer and attending a middle class suburban high school, dispute this account. The *New York Times* article explains the discrepancies between Daniels's own account of his life and his close relatives' account with reference to his inherent showmanship as a filmmaker, noting: "As always, Daniels is weaving a cinematic tale of his youth" (Hirschberg n. p.). *Precious*'s difficulties in getting made supposedly emanated from its frank depiction of African American ghetto life, especially in relationship to its representations of intra-racial and familial violence. Yet the film debuted in the same year in which two of the top grossing films of the year, *Madea Goes to Jail* and *Tyler Perry's I Can Do Bad All by Myself*, also revolved around African American criminality and family violence, which they invoke within traditional Hollywood genre formulas.

Daniels's career epitomizes the grey area between the tradition of African American independent film production and African Americans' post-civil rights inclusion in Hollywood. Daniels is continuously represented in relationship to the tradition of Black independent filmmaking though his films are tied to the traditional mechanisms of Hollywood. This tie is made not through the economic conditions or presumptions that traditionally defined Black independent cinema but rather through claims to aesthetic and narrative authenticity. This notion of authenticity is tied seemingly intrinsically to urban violence and criminality. According to the *New York Times* article, "Daniels knows what he's selling: his films combine street-smart bravado with an art-house sensibility."

Because of Black film's interface with public policy and national debates on crime and ongoing racial segregation, Black life as represented on screen becomes as real, perhaps and even more real, than Black life as lived offscreen. From the initial screening of *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) at the White House in 1915 to justify the wave of anti-Black violence that culminated in the Ku Klux Klan revivals of the 1920s to French president Jacques Chirac's invitation to screen the film *Hate* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) at the Élysée Palace as a way to explain the urban rioting of non-white youth in France, cinematic representations of Black life are repeatedly (mis)taken for Black life itself. The characters in *Precious* and *Willie Dynamite* have the power to define African American life not only for audiences unfamiliar with actual African American people but for African Americans themselves.

Documentary film and the documentary impulse in mainstream African American film play a particularly important role in solidifying the relationship between African Americans and containment.

Noting that "black 'freedom' like black servitude itself is a function of white documentation," Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Mark Frederick Baker explore the significance of the documentary function to the construction of African American community:

> A "community" is always a construct, a product of a collective will to documentary power. For the black community such a purchase has meant an enduring ability to transcend the shock of misrecognition (e.g. Sambo) in imaginative acts (folksongs, shouts, hollers, autobiographies) that constitute declarations of cultural independence. (215)

Films, from *Precious, Hate, Boyz in the Hood* to *Menace II Society*, have been lauded for their ability to represent Black reality and many of them operate with a self-conscious mix of the fictional and the real. Susan Sontag has noted: "For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance" (215). Documentary film, with its truth-telling functions, its claims to authenticity, and its roots in anthropology, is the natural terrain for African American inclusion and exclusion to be centralized narratively and aesthetically.

The 2011 documentary *The Interrupters* was celebrated as an attempt to both catalogue and respond to several moral panics around African Americans, drug culture, urban violence, and crime. The director and producer team of Steve James and Peter Gilbert had previously explored African American urban youth in the celebrated and financially successful 1994 documentary *Hoop Dreams* and the subject of crime in their 2008 documentary about the death penalty *At the Death House Door*. The film was co-directed by Alex Kotlowitz, whose bestselling book *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America* offered a non-fictional account of life in a Chicago Housing Project told through the lives of two young African American boys living there. *The Interrupters* explores Chicago's innovative violence reduction program "The Violence Interrupters" promising "an unusually intimate journey into the stubborn persistence of violence in our cities."[4] The program arose out of Cease Fire, a Chicago based NGO, founded by Gary Slutkin, an epidemiologist who believed that the most effective means of preventing violence is to treat it as an infectious disease. Their website declares "violence should be treated like an epidemic and can be prevented by stopping the behavior at its source" ("The Interrupters" web). The Violence Interrupters Program is an offshoot of this approach and employs former gang members to "interrupt" urban street violence with nonviolent tactics. In the film, Cease Fire and Gary Slutkin's role in the organization are minimized in favor of a focus on Tio Hardman, the creator of the Violence Interrupters program and three formerly incarcerated Chicagoans who now work in the program. *The Interrupters* profiles these three Violence Interrupters and follows them as they go about their business and lives in Chicago.

The film is at least partially carried by the charisma of the three Interrupters with a particular focus on Ameena Matthews, who is the daughter of Jeff Fort, one of Chicago's most notorious gangsters. The film briefly mentions that Fort is currently incarcerated for conspiring with the Libyan government to commit acts of "domestic terrorism" on its behalf but provides few other details of Fort's complicated and fascinating involvement with crime, government social welfare programs, Black radical politics, and radical Islam. Fort was the first person convicted in contemporary times of domestic terrorism in the U.S. and is currently still held in permanent solitary confinement in the

Federal Supermax Prison in Florence, Colorado. This controversial prison is considered one of the most extreme and inhumane prisons in the United States because solitary confinement is mandatory and experienced by prisoners 23 hours a day in conditions that have been cited for their violations of human rights. Several human rights groups, including Amnesty International, have criticized conditions in Supermax Prisons and noted that prisoners at the infamous Guatanamo Bay Prison enjoy greater rights (Rhodes). One report terms the Supermax facility at Florence "The Last Worst Place" in the U.S. penal system because "[a]t Florence, isolation is all there is" (Taylor web).

The Interrupters' lack of interest in or explanation about Fort or his connection to Matthews beyond her personal narrative of abandonment by him follows a general pattern of depoliticization of the film's context. Situating the violence that the film explores in socio-political or socio-historical context has been the trend of documentary film exploring African American urban working-class life since the sixties, including the director's previous film *Hoop Dreams*. Since *The Interrupters* follows the Cease Fire project's notion of violence as biology, marking it as pathological, inevitable, and ultimately endemic to Black life, the film represents an important paradigm shift for documentary cinema that depicts African Americans and crime. The biologicalization turns violence into an apolitical phenomenon according to a neoliberal trend to contest the politicization of policing and criminalization of African American and Latinx populations by groups like the Black Panther Party, whose Ten Point Platform was built on a demand that all incarcerated African Americans be recognized as political prisoners. The increasing depoliticization of Black mass incarceration has been matched by the escalation of criminalization of African Americans, especially as it is visited on groups that were somewhat excluded in the past such as women and younger children.

For *The Interrupters*, violence is literally a pathogen and the evidence of its presence seems to irrevocably reside most powerfully in Black working class bodies. It is a violence that is fully evacuated of meaning as a potential critique of exclusion or economic injustice as in earlier hood films or Blaxploitation. Hood films, such as *New Jack City* and *Boyz in the Hood*, engaged in an open critique of economic injustice and the Reagan administration. Films that focused on youth violence and crime, such as *New Jersey Drive*, *Straight Outta Brooklyn*, and *Menace II Society*, did so in the context of social and economic exclusion and police violence. Even Blaxploitation films, which are largely seen as apolitical and even retrogressive, repeatedly reference Black radical politics positively and consistently represent anti-Black police violence. In contrast to *The Interrupters*' depiction of violence and the work of the Violence Interrupters, Jeff Fort seemed to view urban violence as deeply political. Fort's engagement with a social change agenda via radical politics and government social welfare programs began as a young teenage leader of the group Blackstone Rangers, a group that would grow into one of the Chicago's most powerful criminal organizations. In his late teens, Fort already managed to establish himself as a youth organizer in both the Presbyterian Church and a federal anti-poverty program. Fort was able to establish, through the Presbyterian Church, a legal defense fund for members of the Blackstone Rangers funded by donations of 260,000 dollars by the Kettering Foundation (Moore and Williams 66).

Despite the film's lack of historical context, the Violence Interrupters' notion of engaging those closest to urban violence to participate in the disruption of that violence and in the possible redemption/rehabilitation of violent youth is not new in Chicago. The history of Jeff Fort's engagement with everyone from the Presbyterian Church, the Nation of Islam, the Kettering Foundation, and

Federal Anti-Poverty Programs dates back to the 1950s and testifies to both Black radical politics and liberal democracies' ongoing investment in this idea. Fort was, in fact, a remarkable figure in the history of such programs. Over the course of his time both inside and outside of prison, Fort actively engaged politically with radicalism and also with government programs aimed at quelling youth violence. At one point, Fort appeared before a congressional committee on corruption in the anti-poverty programs and refused to testify to the committee. Fort's 1987 conviction on terrorism charges would provide the blueprint for post-911 terrorism convictions (Moore and Williams 201).

Because the Violence Interrupters program is focused on public acts of violence, rather than acts of domestic violence, the film, for the most part, rotates around violent Black masculinity that it constructs aesthetically and narratively as pathological. In order to create Ameena Matthews as heroic, the film necessitates the presence of her father as irredeemably criminal and pathologically masculine in the ways scripted by the Moynihan Report. Though the film rotates around the personal stories of the three Violence Interrupters that it follows, it does not explore the domestic as a significant site of violence, with the exception of naming Ameena Matthews's own troubled past as being rooted in a fatherless upbringing. Jeff Fort's "abandonment" of Matthews, which causes her to be left in a series of female-headed households, is at least partially the result of his repeated and ongoing incarceration. Though we can see the negotiation of increasing criminalization in the presence of incarceration in narrative cinema, films rarely explore incarceration itself as a significant factor in the restructuring of African American family life.

In contrast to the absence of a depiction of the consequences of mass incarceration on African American family life, domesticity is often at the center of white dramas involving criminality and drug culture. Television dramas such as *Orange is the New Black*, *Ozark*, *Weeds*, and *Breaking Bad* rotate around the incursion of criminal drug cultures into mainstream American life. They do so by normalizing drug dealing in relationship to white suburban family life. Criminality is presented as a disruption of family life, whose consequences generate narrative and visual irony. Though these series rotate around white suburban protagonists and the complications that criminality brings to suburban family life, they replicate the structure of *The Interrupters* in that the image of danger, gender crisis, and deviant criminality necessitates the presence of Black and brown criminals lurking at the boundaries of narrative and visual representation. They repeat the formula of whites at the center of narrative and visual representation with non-white peoples as visual rather than narrative accessories. While the intensely personally focused, raw, and "true to life" nature of films like *The Interrupters* would seem to grant an insight into African American life that fictional representations like *Weeds* and *Breaking Bad* would seem to disallow, it might be more accurate to see them as amplifications of the narrative and visual formulas of mainstream representations of African Americans and criminality. In a sense, *The Interrupters* uses the immediacy of the present to hide the ghosts of the historical past that have created the possibility for Black mass incarceration. It positions the raw reality that it portrays squarely outside of history and any context beyond the personal that that history might invoke.

Excavating the historical past has become a preoccupation of Black documentary and independent film since the seventies, from collectives such as California Newsreel, that evolved from creating newsreel-like documentaries on current events relevant to African Americans in the late sixties to its current incarnation as a developer and distributor of documentaries for radical social change, to filmmakers like St. Clair Bourne, Haile Gerima, and Raoul Peck whose work moves between an

excavation of historical documentary footage and narrativization of events otherwise lost to visual representation. Coco Fusco's 2004 experimental short film *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* emerges out of this tradition and directly confronts the convenient absence of history in films like *The Interrupters* and the fantasies of Black captivity around which those representations are constructed. The film uses a mixture of found footage, historical recreation, and dramatization to explore the legacy of Angela Davis as a sort of lost legacy of radical Black politics of the sixties and seventies. The film begins as a voiceover intones over a grainy black and white close-up image of Angela Davis:

> I had started to feel like the world had been invaded by a past that we could recognize but no longer understand. Something told me that my own memory was going. I was noticing too many things without being able to say much about them other than that I had seen them before. Though I could no longer match every face from that time with a name, I still recognized hers. Like most of those who had seen her, I hardly knew who she was. What I did know was that her image cast a long shadow.

The image, which is possibly drawn from television, appears at once familiar and disturbing in the distortion that its closeness evokes. The film notes that the "unrelenting scrutiny" that Davis was subjected to "magnified every detail of her being beyond recognition." This is refracted through the film's aesthetic that mixes and distorts television footage to make what would otherwise be familiar, eerie, and surreal. Davis, a prominent activist in radical struggles in the late sixties and seventies, was accused of assisting the failed attempt to free incarcerated activist George Jackson. Shortly after the failed plot, Davis fled a potential arrest as an accessory to the crime and spent several months in the 1970s as the subject of a massive manhunt, one of few women to ever be named to the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List. The film shows footage of then-President Richard Nixon during the signing of sweeping anti-crime legislation describing "the actions of the FBI in apprehending Angela Davis" as "a rather remarkable story again in a long history of remarkable stories of apprehensions by the FBI" and that it presents a "warning by signing the bill that we are going to give the tools to the men in the Justice Department and the FBI." Fusco utilizes the material remnants of history that remain because of Angela Davis's status as a celebrity fugitive to explore the construction of Davis's image as a mythology that justified an expansion of federal policing powers. Fusco notes that everyone from the court reporter to a jury woman, law professor, and former schoolmate published accounts of Davis, reflecting a curious desire of onlookers "to be seen seeing her." Fusco uses this framing of Davis as infinitely catalogued, but ultimately unknowable, as a framing device for a fictionalized dramatization of a young African American woman who is researching Davis's confrontations with a former FBI agent who is equally obsessed with her. The woman's continuing interactions with the agent are spurred on by his promise to reveal previously unknown information about Davis. In Fusco's film, Davis is never revealable beyond the pseudonym she took on to avoid capture, which gives the film its title: *a/k/a Mrs George Gilbert*. Her image has disappeared under the complexities that its revelation both uncovers and obscures.

Moving between the real and the iconography around criminality, the film explains "America's obsession" with the Black Panther Party, that Davis was accused of assisting, as based on a self-sustaining mythology that it neither completely created nor controlled. It observes: "Nestled inside the

myth was a wish that every Panther would have a gun and every Panther would have an afro so that under every afro there would be a Panther." Of Davis, the film's voiceover concludes: "The agents had her pictures, her diaries, her doodles and her letters but they couldn't see her." Testifying to the power of image culture to redefine the real, the film does not hold out that the fictional researcher or the viewer see Davis either. Fusco excavates this history in a manner that comments on and expands the representational prison that African Americans are locked in relationship to the cinema of captivity that has developed since the seventies. Themes of surveillance, the mythology of African American criminality, the impossibility of Black representation outside of the lens of criminality, and the representational culture that binds it all together are the subject of *a/k/a Mrs George Gilbert*.

Iton suggests that the carceral Black body not only signals the limits of the failed project of emancipation but also tests the boundaries of citizenship and the nation-state. The cinematic space of captivity and visual representations of captivity do more than this: they begin to tests the limits of subjectivity. Films like *Willie Dynamite, The Interrupters*, and *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* suggest the intractability of images of the carceral from images of African Americans. For the context of U.S. visual culture, the carceral has become the African American and vice versa with no means of escape.

Notes

1. This phrase was popularized by Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, The New Press, 2010.
2. Gladstone Yearwood. *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Cinema*, Ohio UP, 1982.
3. Notorious BIG. "Ten Crack Commandments." *Life After Death*, Bad Boy Records, 1997.
4. Steve James. *The Interrupters*. Kartemquin Films, 2011.

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